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John 11:1-45; Ezekiel 37:1-14

GOD'S TARDINESS

I think it is fair to say we are an impatient people. We don't like to wait. We are impatient if the internet is moving just a fraction too slow. We are impatient when the check-out clerk at the grocery store is bagging the groceries too slowly. We are impatient with drivers on the road and with colleagues or friends who don't respond to emails or text messages immediately. We want things to move quickly and to happen quickly. And I think this impatience has only increased with the advancement of technology which creates in us higher and higher expectations of speed and immediacy.

So what are we to do with a God who doesn't always act immediately, who doesn't jump when we say jump, who doesn't move according to our time table, who sometimes even seems to be tardy in responding to us? That is what seems to be happening in today's story about Lazarus. Jesus is tardy in arriving to see his very ill friend. And according to the story, Jesus seems to be tardy on purpose. When the sisters Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus, Jesus' very dear friend, is ill, Jesus delays going to see him.

Now there are so many reasons why this is upsetting to us. Tardiness is disrespectful. It means that others have to wait on you, that others are inconvenienced, that others may even suffer in some way. The underlying message when someone arrives late is that they have other more important things to do. When I was growing up I was one of four siblings--and with a clan of that size, getting out the door in a timely way was not always easy. As a parent, I can now appreciate the challenges that my parents faced. But at the time, I hated being late to places,

hated how friends would joke when we arrived late, "Oh yeah, we're on Daub time." Tardiness is disrespectful.

And yet, that is the value our Western culture has placed on time. Not everyone regards time that way. There are cultures that have a far more relaxed relationship with time and with punctuality. Maybe you've had the occasion to visit such a culture where people are far less uptight about punctuality than we are. In such cultures, an event that is scheduled to start at a certain time might not get underway until an hour or two later. People dribble in and no one is disturbed or offended by what many of us would regard as tardiness. They are more relaxed with a looser relationship with time.

Still, even if Jesus lived in a culture that had a looser relationship with time than we do today, his delay in going to his very ill friend seems callous. Where was Jesus' pastoral sensitivity? When I learn that someone in my congregation is hospitalized, I rush to the hospital as soon as I can. Someone I care about is facing a scary situation. I want to offer whatever care I can. And so I hurry to be at their side.

You know something I notice in scripture? We never read anywhere in scripture about Jesus rushing or hurrying. We read many examples of the disciples or others running from one place to the next, of people hurrying to get somewhere. But we never hear about Jesus hurrying. I got to thinking about that difference: between us who rush around trying to manage a lot of things, trying to get places on time and Jesus, a man who didn't seem to rush anywhere. When you think about it, rushing is the activity of people out of control, desperately trying to regain the illusion of control. Because control is an illusion, right. There is much about life that lies beyond our control. But we like to pretend as if we could control life. And so we run around managing a great many things, keeping very busy, trying to push back the chaos of life,

exhausting ourselves with all our activity. We are in a hurry to do it all, to manage it all. In short, we live as if we are God, the one who can control things. All our rushing around, slaves to time, is just a form of idolatry.

Jesus, however, had no misplaced illusion of control. He knew who was in control of this world. Jesus served God, not time. He accepted what lay within his control and all the rest, he trusted to God.

A component of this story about Lazarus reminds us that God is not bound to our urgency around time. God does not perform on demand. God's grace does not come in predictable forms or time tables. God takes God's own time to accomplish God's activity. And that means we are sometimes left to wait, to learn patience in allowing God to be God. Writer Barbara Brown Taylor notes that "Only an idol always answers. The God who keeps silence, even when God's own flesh and blood is begging for a word, is the God beyond anyone's control."

And yet, and yet what are we to make of God's tardiness in the face of our pain and suffering? God is not an idol whom we can control, but we do claim that God is a God of goodness and love. How could a God of goodness and love not rush to save us from our suffering?

This is what Mary and Martha want to know. How could Jesus not come to the aid of their brother Lazarus? When Jesus does finally make it to Bethany, it is too late. Lazarus is already dead. Four days have gone by. First Martha and then later Mary says to Jesus the exact same words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." The sub-text we might hear in this statement is: "Where the hell have you been, Jesus? Did you not care enough to come in time?"

This is an issue for which, I am sorry to say, there is no real satisfactory answer. How could God not rush in to save us from our suffering: when we lose our job, when our marriage is falling apart, when our spouse is ill, where children are suffering from hunger or abuse, where communities are immersed in war? Why would God delay in helping us, rescuing us, saving us? We need and want God to make it right *now*, to come to us sooner, faster, quicker, to fix what is terribly wrong. We might come up with all kinds of answers to this problem. We might say that God's time is not our time--that is true. Or we might speculate that maybe God really is with us in such moments only we fail to see God's presence--that could be true too. But what is true for many of us is that at such times of pain, it may feel to us, as it did to Mary and Martha, that God has delayed coming to our aid.

I wish I had a better answer to this tardiness question about God. But I don't. However, I do discover something else when I look at this biblical story. When Jesus finally arrives in Bethany, he goes to visit Lazarus' tomb. And everybody is weeping. Weeping, we are told--not simply crying, not a few tears trickling down the cheeks. Picture Mary doubled over, her sister having to hold her up. Hear the sobbing of the friends and family gathered around, the sobbing that comes from deep within the human heart and soul. And then we are told that Jesus himself begins to weep. We might imagine him falling to his knees, his face in his hands, the sobs welling up from within. He wept for his beloved friend. He wept for all the pain and suffering we know and all the tragedies we endure. And in his tears we learn that this is not a God who stands at a distance, watching dispassionately while we are in pain. This is not some kind of a mad-scientist who cruelly tests us with adversity. This is a God who personally feels our pain.

It is a hopeless day there at Lazarus' tomb with all those weeping people. But then something else happens. On that hopeless day, among that hopeless crowd, God calls forth life.

Four days have passed since Lazarus has died. By the fourth day, the body has begun to decompose. Even Martha knows this and says to Jesus' instruction to remove the stone, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." When your loved one is reduced to an odor, that is when you know it is time to abandon hope. But God steps into that dark hole of hopelessness and brings forth life. And when Jesus calls into that pit of death, "Lazarus, come out!" life overcomes death.

In that, we can have hope. God brings life out of death. And some days that is enough. It is enough to believe in the God of love who is at work bringing life out of death in ways we can't predict, in a time that defies our understanding. Some days it is enough. And other days, when faced with the pain of this world, the sufferings of loved ones, other days I want God to act faster, sooner, and in ways that make sense to me.

Many years ago, a colleague of mine was diagnosed with a very serious and aggressive form of cancer. We were all devastated for him and his family. He was still young and very vibrant. When I visited with him in the hospital where he was receiving a very intense form of chemotherapy, he shared with me his absolute conviction that God was going to cure him. I was astonished at his audacious certainty in what God would do, but of course I prayed that this might indeed come about for him. But a few months later he died, leaving me to ponder what had taken place. Was God too late in acting? Had God failed him? Or was my friend misguided in believing in God's saving activity?

This claim to believe in God's saving love, God's healing power, God's life-giving intentions is indeed audacious. But I don't think it is ever wrong to believe in this. Maybe our error comes in trying to *define* in what form and in what time God will bestow these gifts. And maybe we might miss seeing them altogether if we have already decided when these gifts shall

come and what they should look like. And I wonder if we might consider this possibility as well: that the silence we may receive to our prayers may not be the *absence* of God as we sometimes think, but could possibly be the *presence* of God. What if our longing, yearning, pleading for God *is* the gift we have been given by God, drawing us ever closer into the mystery of the Divine presence and the Source of life.